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AUTHOR Steele, Toren Anderson
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and evaluates the Blalock FIRST (Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Teaching) project, a 3-year, federally funded project based in an elementary school that serves mainly female-headed, African-American families who receive government assistance and live in public housing. The Blalock FIRST project seeks to increase school attendance and achievement of students in kindergarten through grade 7, reduce the number of students who are retained or placed in remedial programs, improve students' self-esteem and increase teachers' expectations for student achievement, and increase family and community support for, and involvement in, school activities. Three programs developed by Blalock FIRST are discussed in detail. The programs are: (1) the Viking Center, a 30-minute daily class attended by students who exhibit disruptive classroom behavior; (2) Newstart, a 30-day intervention program designed to reduce disciplinary problems among students; and (3) the Parent Center, designed to assist parents with family or individual problems while encouraging their participation in school activities. The Blalock FIRST staff, teachers, and parents found that the projects had a very positive effect on the school and the educational process. Contains 34 references. (MDM)

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DEVELOPING SUPPORT SYSTEMS WITHIN SCHOOLS: CREATING A FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE

Toren Anderson Steele

Center for the Study of Adult Literacy
Georgia State University, Atlanta

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Completed as part of Blalock FIRST, a three-year intervention study funded by the U. S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Training, and directed by Dr. James C. Young, Professor of Early Childhood Education and Researcher, Center for the Study of Adult Literacy, Georgia State University, Atlanta.

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> "We want the best for these children but they come to us needing so much. We can't do our jobs unless parents take more responsibility for their children. I spend more time baby sitting than teaching. What we are asked and expected to do is unrealistic." [a teacher]
>
> "I want my kids to do well in school. I dropped out and I know what it's like to not be able to get the kind of job that you really want. A lot of the parents have it rough, but it ain't the kids fault. Some of these teachers, they talk to our kids like they are dogs. They don't listen to us. These kids have a right to be treated like any other human being. It shouldn't matter where they live or what their parents do." [a parent]
>
> "There's no use in trying. The teachers have favorites and they always choose the same kids to be in programs or run errands. The teachers aren't fair. They don't like us." [a student]

What kind of educational programming can be designed and implemented that will result in positive and significant changes in the behaviors of teachers, students, and parents? This question is being addressed by educators across the nation as frustration, anger, alienation, and ambivalence towards the educational process is reported here in here in this composite sample of coments obtained from interviews and surveys that were conducted with teachers, parents, and students in one inner city elementary school and in the works of Slaughter (1987), Comer (1984; 1988), Jackson and Cooper (1989), Nardine (1990), Clark (1983), and Rasinski and Fredericks (1989). Researchers have established that parents and educators are of one accord in agreeing that academic success for students is a desired outcome (Scheinfeld, 1981; Hranitz and Eddowes, 1987; Slaughter, and Prom-Jackson, Johnson and Wallace, 1987). Developing programming that is sensitive to the needs of these interconnected populations and results in the desired

academic improvements, however, is a delicate juggling act.

Blalock FIRST (Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Teaching) is a three-year, federally-funded project that serves African-American families who are predominately female heads of households on government subsidized incomes living in inner-city housing. The project is based in an elementary school which serves only families living in the adjacent public housing. The overall goals of Blalock FIRST are to: increase school attendance and achievement in reading and mathematics of students in Kindergarten through Grade 7; implement a Class Improvement Support System Project (CISS) in classrooms; reduce the number of students who are retained or placed in remedial programs (Chapter 1 & REP); improve students' self-esteem; increase teachers' expectations for students' achievement; increase involvement and cooperation of students' families; and increase community support for and involvement in school activities.

From the onset, Blalock FIRST relied heavily on input from parents, teachers, school officials and students to avoid focusing on issues that were not perceived as problems or real questions, a practice often times associated with teacher educators working in the public schools (Huling, Trang, and Correll, 1981). The concerns of each group were obtained through conducting surveys, interviews, faculty meetings, a student inventory, informal rap sessions, and original writings of parents and students. Gathering this information assisted in determining a starting point for intervention and how best to proceed towards meeting the specific

goals of the project. Respondents included the instructional faculty and support staff of the elementary school, in-house school administrators, parent participants in an on-going adult literacy class, and 130 children and their parents who participated in Blalock FIRST sponsored programs over the course of the year.

A key component included in the design of the literacy project envisioned teachers as diagnosticians in their classrooms developing additional effective teaching strategies that resulted in improved academic performance by students. When approached with this concept, teachers expressed feeling overwhelmed. The focal point of teacher frustration centered on the display of inappropriate classroom behaviors by students; parental indifference; and external constraints including perceived unrealistic demands made by the system with regards to implementation of the curriculum (Duffy and Roehler, 1986). Some of the instructional staff recognized the influence that their overt and subtle behaviors had on the performance of students (Woolfolk and Brooks 1985; Slaughter and Epps, 1987; Brattesani, Weinstein and Marshall, 1984; and Beale, 1985). A majority of the teachers, however, stated that the disruptive behaviors of their students and the limited amount of support that many of the students received from home affected their sense of efficacy to a greater degree. The cyclical process of mutual influence of teacher expectations and student performance was a negative force in the school.

The non-receptive attitude and low morale of teachers, factors

that have been suggested to influence both instructional strategies and motivation (Midgley, Feldlaufer and Eccles, 1989; Guskey, 1986; Moon and Wells, 1979) made it apparent that a significant change in teachers' belief and attitudes and acceptance for the responsibility of student performance would occur only following a change in student learning outcomes (Ashton, 1984; and Guskey, 1986). Programming emphasis for the project was then placed on increasing appropriate classroom behaviors of students while simultaneously increasing the positive involvement of parents in the school as precursors to improved student learning outcomes. This was accomplished by developing three new programs: The Viking Center, Newstart, and the Parent Center.

The Viking Center

Project staff sought to increase the number of positive and successful encounters children experienced with adults in the school setting. In interviews conducted with children, there were frequent expressions that some teachers did not care, did not like them, or treated them unfairly, and that classes were boring. Sensitive to this perception, a strategy was initiated to engage children in the school in friendly interactions; greeting students as they entered the building, complimenting students, smiling, and requesting that students look the speaker in the eye during these interchanges. It was felt that valuing students would be a foundation for establishing mutual trust and cooperation which are reported as prerequisites to effective learning (Yuki, 1981; Rasinski and Fredericks, 1989; and McDermitt, 1977).

Building on this rapport, a special program, the Viking Center, was established. It was a daily, 30 minute pull-out demonstration class and began to address teachers immediate concern of disruptive classroom behavior. Each teacher in grades K-5 was asked to identify one child who demonstrated considerable difficulty when attending, distractibility, low tests scores of cognitive functioning, or language variables, several of the indicators that have the greatest predictive relation with early school achievement (Horn and Packard, 1985). A total of nineteen children, four from kindergarten and three from each of the other grade levels, were identified and attended the sessions together for the last thirty minutes of the school day.

Viking Center sessions were divided into three ten-minute segments: an exploratory activity, a language activity, and a group activity. Lessons emphasized engaging the students in activities that provided frequent opportunities for involvement, information that was presented in short segments, clear and consistent verbalizations of acceptable behavior, charting of students progress, and timed activities (Shapiro, 1988; Miller and McDaniel, 1989). Other strategies that resulted in the desired attending and time-on-task behaviors included: students understanding the reasons for using literacy skills and applying the skills to real life situations (Barell, 1985; Janiuk and Shanahan, 1988; and Moore, 1981), personal space being well defined and maintained, using highly graphic materials, over-learning, positive verbal feedback, encouraging students to make decisions,

allowing children to rotate between work stations at the end of each ten-minute segment, and encouraging students to freely express themselves during group discussions in order to unlearn codes of participation that subtly taught children to be silent (Fine, 1989).

The first segment, an exploratory activity, focused on increasing student attending and time-on-task behavior. The activities employed the use of a variety of commercial, office, and familiar household articles that called upon the students to manipulate, categorize, sequence, design, measure, estimate, weigh, construct and assemble items. Projects completed in the exploratory activity were further incorporated into the language and group activities.

During the language activity, students created lists of favorites (hobbies, foods, cars, vacation, television shows, sport figures, dances, clothing styles, family members, games) from which group stories dictated by the students and recorded by project staff were developed. Each week the group decided upon a category from which to develop a story. Stories were added to each day, with students including new vocabulary words and supportive information that had been researched

Lively discussions were characteristic of the language activity. Several group members did independent research on subjects of particular interest to ensure that their comments would be included in the final version of the story and challenged others to do the same. Older and more literate children worked

cooperatively with younger students, encouraging the younger ones to express their opinions and eagerly assisting them in reading difficult passages whenever necessary. The stories were jointly edited by the group and project staff and final versions of the stories were displayed in the classroom and shared with other students in their homerooms and parent volunteers.

The daily culminating group experience, focused on group interpersonal skills, listening, following directions, sharing teacher attention, and cooperatively and independently working on tasks to completion. As an example of the type of activities used in the Viking Center, students were given the task of creating a giant mosaic portrait of a favorite television character using one-by-one inch squares. Group members during the exploratory activity predicted how many different colored squares would be needed to complete the portrait and colored, cut, and assembled the necessary pieces together to form the picture. Project staff facilitated a group discussion during the language activity in which group members analyzed the character's role on the show, and cited what they felt contributed to the character's popularity. On successive days, students researched details of the show and added these to the story. Over the course of the week, the daily contributions evolved into the group story. The final ten minutes of the daily sessions were spent with the group participating in games (e.g. bingo, sentence completion, word puzzles, beat the clock) that reinforced the concepts and new vocabulary.

Feedback from faculty members indicated that children eagerly

anticipated coming to the center. Generalization of improved student behavior in regular classes was being observed. Teachers reported an increase in students' remaining in designated areas, demonstrating a willingness to volunteer in class, beginning assignments with minimal assistance, remaining on task, and asking for help more appropriately. Several teachers made impromptu visits to observe both the learning environment and the children actively engaged in activities. Requests were made by several teachers to involve more children in the Center. Updates on student progress and examples and demonstrations of the kind of activities and techniques that were being used with he children were shared with the faculty during faculty meetings. Workshops on behavior management, school climate, the use of learning centers and manipulatives in the classroom were also part of the staff development curriculum. While the school leadership acknowledged the positive influence of the Viking Center and felt that teachers were familiar with the strategies being used, there was concern that few teachers appeared to be incorporating what they saw into their classrooms on a regular basis to facilitate greater generalization of the targeted behaviors.

Newstart

The scheduled annual field day provided the vehicle for faculty members to become more directly involved in employing alternative strategies in their classrooms. Field day had been suspended the prior school year due to the disruptive behavior of students; this resulted in increased tension between the school and

the community. As a preventative measure to the field day being canceled a second year, a thirty-day intervention program was jointly planned between the school, faculty and project staff. Seventy-five students, referred to the office for chronic disciplinary reasons, participated in the program entitled Newstart.

Three to five students from each class in grades K-6 were seen by class, for thirty minutes twice a week. Students participating in Newstart were made aware that their attendance at field day was contingent upon their successful participation the the program. Group members were first asked to identify the behaviors that they felt resulted in their being sent to the office and possible methods they felt would help them better control their behavior. Blalock staff assisted students in identifying alternatives to inappropriate behaviors including: removing themselves from situations, ignoring, remaining silent, writing down comments, asking for adult intervention, and having a verbal or visual cue that served as a warning. With assistance, the students produced a self-monitoring checklist which was reviewed daily and given to each child's Physical Education and homeroom teachers to be completed each week. Teachers were also provided with Newstart and field day activities to be reinforced in their classrooms. During the intervention period students created materials that were related to the field day including background information on each event, name tags, bulletin boards, T-shirts, certificates of achievement, signs for the field, and morning announcements.

Students worked in the Newstart classroom and also in hallways and the cafeteria allowing for the majority of teachers and administrators to observe these students behaving appropriately. Students received a great deal of praise and reminders that their attendance at field day was anticipated and that they were making important contributions to making the field day a successful event. Students also received additional practice on how to play each field day event that had been introduced and practiced in Physical Education class. The Physical Education teacher tape recorded her expectations for appropriate behavior during field day and the consequences for inappropriate behavior. These tapes were reviewed with students at the beginning of each week. Each student wrote (the younger students dictated) a paragraph on the meaning of field day and their role as would be participants. Teachers were asked to encourage students verbally, and the project staff made spot checks during the day to provide encouragement to students. Weekly evaluations of student performance outside of the Newstart class were recorded by the Physical Education and homeroom teachers and shared with students.

At the end of the intervention period, 60 of the original 75 students successfully completed the program. These students demonstrated, at least 95% of the time, the ability to remain in a designated area throughout a class period, interact with their classmates without arguing or fighting, follow the directions of several adult authority figures, and refrain from entering into verbal confrontations with their teachers. The improvements in

behavior were demonstrated, maintained and generalized in the Newstart class and in other instructional settings which permitted the students to attend the field day with the remainder of the school. The success of the event was attributed both to the students believing that their efforts would pay off, thereby increasing their motivation and good performance (Cooper and Tom, 1984), and to the principal and the teachers having established a common vocabulary, common philosophy, and a consistent view which supported change (Berlin and Jensen, 1989). School leaders further reported more instances of observing teachers involving students in a greater variety of activities over the course of the intervention in their classrooms.

This cooperative undertaking was the outcome of a process that developed a certain level of trust between the participants; directly involved all parties' wholesale commitment to the project and action upon that commitment; required thorough planning, ongoing encouragement and support, modeling of desired behaviors, and opening lines of communication. This process was fundamental, not only to the success of the field day, but to the increase of parental involvement in the school.

Parent Center

Establishing a Parent Center in the school was instrumental in creating a climate of acceptance among the parents. Overtures initiated by the school to involve parents in traditional parent involvement functions such as PTA and fund raisers (Slaughter and Epps, 1987) had met with little success. The Parent Center staffed

by Blalock FIRST project members and made available during the normal school hours of operation fulfilled a variety of needs. The non-threatening atmosphere of the Parent Center furnished a temporary respite for parents in abusive situations; an informal peer counseling center for those seeking advice or just needing a listening ear; an avenue to recruit school volunteers; a resource for learning alternative parenting skills; a reception area for a number of family and school-related functions; and a rehearsal hall for parents to practice new skills in writing, public speaking, hosting, acting, and group communications.

Additionally, the Parent Center assisted in forming a cooperative partnership between the school and parents. It demonstrated a willingness to tackle complex issues including: unresolved personal needs (Maslow, 1970; Hranitz and Eddowes, 1987), prior negative experiences with the school (Slaughter and Epps, 1987; Rasinski and Fredericks, 1989), and a desire to be involved but not knowing exactly how to begin (Shields, 1983; Allen and Freitag, 1983). Creating time to listen and encouraging open discussion facilitated dismantling some longstanding perceptions that school personnel did not respect community members, highlighted differences between children, and practiced unfair disciplinary procedures. Over the course of the project, a core of parents became more involved in the school and were responsive to the inclusion of purposeful activities that provided opportunities for their own growth, increased their responsibility within the school, and were applicable to real life. Comer (1984) found that

the increased visibility and involvement of parents in the school supplies not only the needed emotional support for students but also the monitoring of behaviors desired by the school staff.

School Support Systems

The experiences presented here support the idea that systematic intervention is effective with relation to the cyclical process of mutual influence of teacher expectations and student performance when there exists total involvement from faculty, students, and the community. Student performance improves when students are made to feel secure and accepted by their instructors and are able to develop positive attachments to the school. Welcoming parents in the school setting as allies in supporting students further reinforces appropriate school behaviors. In like fashion, administrators and teachers perceiving significant improvement in student performance demonstrate a greater willingness to change modes of operation. Essential to strengthening these fragile interdependent connections is the commitment of time, brainstorming, and being willing to explore nontraditional approaches.

Developing cooperative partnerships between the home and school further holds the promise of long term benefits. Cultivating more cooperative relationships between the home and the school provides a largely untapped resource of parents. Children benefit emotionally from seeing familiar community figures in responsible positions within the school. Instructional staff, given the right support, are then free to share their expertise and

teach creatively. Finally, parents, given equal support, have the potential to develop the skills and confidence to become more actively involved within the school environment.

The ongoing challenge is to establish support systems that maintain a climate within the school that acknowledges, welcomes, and encourages the important contributions of capable and competent teachers and concerned and involved parents, and that has the outcome of motivated, responsible, productive students.

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